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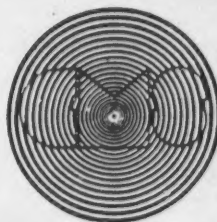
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ABSTRACT

The use of marketing concepts to maintain and enhance the image of a university is considered. Over all, what is needed is a system for image assessment to provide a basis for image development. Without this system and its information outputs, misconceptions can enter the policy-making process at critical junctures, and the life of the institution can be adversely affected. Developing the necessary information requires data on outsiders' views of faculty, curriculum, teaching quality, and the cost of attending college. Much of these data can be derived from current students, alumni, and those in the surrounding local community. With these data, a marketing action program can be developed. From these programs, top academic administrators can take the necessary steps to maintain and enhance the institution's image. A number of issues center on the faculty's image. It needs to be determined if the faculty, as a whole, is perceived as current by the institution's publics. A second potential key issue is the nature of the faculty's professional activities. Curriculum needs to be perceived as being reasonably modern in order to support a desirable image for any vital institution. The quality of teaching is another important area of concern. It is concluded that since faculty activity appears to be a critical area, research programs need to determine the extent to which faculty achievements and activities are being highlighted. It is also important to monitor the attitude of current student attitudes about the institution. In a similar manner, alumni need to be questioned about their image perceptions. Target groups within the community include parents and employers. (SW)

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MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY IMAGE

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of the
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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Second Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Denver Hilton Hotel in Denver, Colorado, May 16-19, 1982. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
Forum Publication
Advisory Committee

MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING A COLLEGE
OR UNIVERSITY IMAGE

ABSTRACT

The use of marketing concepts in higher education has been a topic for discussion and analysis for over a decade, but most of the work has centered on selling techniques for recruiting and retaining students. Other marketing concerns relating to image maintenance and enhancement have been unfairly neglected.

To better understand this important area, post-secondary institutions need to do a better job in understanding the inter-connecting pillars of the academic institutional image. Developing the necessary information to provide this understanding requires data on outsiders' views of:

- faculty
- curriculum
- teaching quality
- the tuition-quality relationship.

Much (not all) of these data can be derived from current students, alumni and those in the surrounding local community. With these data, a marketing action program can be developed. From these programs, top academic administrators can take the necessary steps to maintain and enhance their institution's image.

In 1972, I wrote a Chronicle of Higher Education article called, "We Must Market Education" (Fram, 1972). Focusing on how commercial marketing principles can be applied and adapted to the concerns of the higher education community, this Chronicle article is regarded by many as an operational beginning for relating these two fields.

Since 1972, a vast literature on marketing higher education has emerged. To support scholarship and problem-solving in the area, Larry Litten and Joseph Gilmour have developed a formidable bibliography on what has developed during this period (Litten & Gilmour, 1974 & 1980). An additional bibliographic analysis is currently being prepared by Professor Stephen Grabowski of Boston University, under the sponsorship of ERIC.

ADMISSIONS MARKETING

A review of this literature indicates that the major thrust of the writings and analyses is directed at the area of admissions marketing. A significant majority of the articles and books focus on selling techniques for recruiting and retaining students. The coverage is overflowing with such titles as:

- A Marketing Technique for Student Recruiting
- Management Approach to the Buyer's Market
- Colleges Shift to Hard Sell in Recruiting of Students

These admissions themes are so pervasive and restrictive that it is difficult to publish when one tries to develop research and themes that go beyond selling techniques for the admissions function and to deal with broader concerns. The reason for this seems to be that policy level academic administrators tend to delegate what they view as marketing responsibility to admissions personnel. After all, the results of admissions work can easily be demonstrated in student recruitment figures (Fram, 1979)! Because of this restricted operational view, the marketing concerns focusing on maintaining and enhancing institution image have been unfairly neglected.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE

In the commercial world, however, marketing personnel research image with great interest, knowing of its long range implications for revenues. Image provides valuable marketing support because, once well established, it aids marketing for years, perhaps for even a century. Good examples are consumer brand products like Ivory soap and Crisco, both with images about 100 years old. Interestingly enough, Proctor & Gamble (known as the King of the Brands) has only about 50 different brand names in all product lines. Obviously, they are well established ones!

Studies of company image development report that images are basically emotional responses to what people believe about a company as opposed to what the company may be in reality. Related to this self-constructed belief is the fact that images are always over-simplifications in the consumer's mind, based on filtered messages and perceptions. It is also clear that an individual's image may be easily modified, sometimes based on one bad experience (Walters, 1974).

Transferring what is known about company images to higher education yields the conclusion that students, parents and others probably view an institution in a Gestalt (organized whole) sense. They take a series of oversimplifications and develop a view or opinion based on them. Consequently, they can make important decisions based, not on what may be in reality, but on what their Gestalt describes (Markin, 1974). For instance, they can build an institutional Gestalt for a specific school, based on campus physical attributes and basketball notoriety. As a result, a student may enroll in a weak academic department based on a total school Gestalt developed from other attributes.

In another instance, undergraduates report they enroll in an institution because they feel that the quality of teaching is reasonably good for their own needs. Where do they derive

that estimate? Do they visit a cross section of classes? Do they talk with a number of prospective professors? Do they know the name of a single professor before enrollment? The answers to these questions is "no" for a significant majority. Since they do not actively seek this information and rely on filtered messages and perceptions, the total institutional image takes on an unusual importance in developing a pool of applicants. However, this importance has not been reflected in the amount of research and writing completed since 1972.

IMAGE ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT.

Defining the parts of an institutional image involves the evaluation of a number of key attributes. However, these attributes will vary considerably between institutions, with two being common to many. One is the campus environment, which includes the academic physical plant and the dormitory accommodations. These items are of significant interest to prospective students. A second attribute will be the general notoriety of research activity, which seems to be a key factor in constructing the academic component of the image. If the estimate on research is correct, many institutions may be doing themselves a serious disservice by boasting that they are teaching institutions, not research institutions.

To develop a desired image, top academic management must shape the critical attributes properly to achieve image consistency. Without consistency, the understanding of potential donors and students will be confused. Business organizations have long recognized this possibility. For example, Eastman Kodak top management has achieved success by nurturing a high quality stance. They develop superior products that perform well. Consequently, everything this organization does is under the cover of quality, and it is completely bred into the value system. Both neophyte and veteran employees know what it means and adhere to it. I suspect that if one were to scrutinize the image development of many of our top universities, we would find the same system operating, although not as formally as one finds it in the commercial environment.

As investigators interested in marketing higher education, we ought to be able to analyze the image of any particular university and to be able to identify the interconnecting pillars supporting its image. For example, in analyzing Harvard's image, we could assume that it continues to attract ample applications and significant financial donations through pillars of:

- historical importance
- Cambridge cultural location
- research thrusts
- alumni.

However, research and analysis might indicate the following pillars are more important to Harvard's success:

- quality teaching
- student support service
- the football team.

The following quotation from a recent economic analysis of university behavior summarizes the situation well:

"An institution's actual quality is often less important than its prestige, or reputation for quality, because it is the university's perceived excellence which, in fact, guides the decisions of prospective students and scholars considering offers of employment, and federal agencies awarding grants." (Garvin, 1982).

THE RESPONSIBILITY

Who should be responsible for image maintenance and enhancement? It should be top policy administrators, under the careful direction of the president. Like his business counterpart, the academic president must be the chief marketing officer, the person who must make certain marketing policy is executed to generate sufficient tuition and other revenues. (Fram, 1979)

To support top administrations in these efforts, image research is needed to empirically define external perceptions of their institutions. Once policy makers understand the true image character, it can be rationally developed or changed. In addition, institutional activities can be related to the realities of the client (student) and donor markets and can be congruent with relevant social, political, and economic environments.

RESEARCH NEEDS

To develop an understanding of an institutional Gestalt, what topics need study and what major groups need surveying? The most frequent needs are:

TOPICS FOR RESEARCH

Faculty Status

Curriculum

Quality of Teaching

Pricing

WHO NEEDS TO BE SURVEYED

Current Students

Alumni

Local Community

The topic and group needs will vary from institution to institution. For example, a prestige institution with a national clientele might want to survey opinion leaders such as educational writers and industrial executives. However, for most institutions, research information derived from the topic and groups suggested should provide a significant part, if not all, of the general Gestalt.

FACULTY STATUS

A number of issues center on the faculty's image. First, it needs to be determined if the faculty, as a whole, is perceived as current by the institution's publics. In some situations, it is rather easy for faculty to unknowingly develop mild or serious cases of obsolescence. Unfortunately, this is not often observable to the students, since they usually lack enough experience and baseline information on which to make such judgments. (Related to this situation is the fact that faculty tend to be individual contributors, and professional obsolescence may not always be observable to colleagues.)

A second potential key issue is the nature of the faculty's professional activities. For a top image, this professional activity should center on being on the frontier in one or more research and thought-developing areas. It should also

include professional (not necessarily administrative) activities in various societies. Through these activities, the faculty should be viewed as realists and reasonably future-minded. Finally, and most overtly, faculty need to be viewed as competent by academic colleagues in other institutions and by others working in their field.

This question of faculty impact on college and university image is one that needs to be studied. The factors suggested above seem most obvious, and others may need to be investigated. Since faculty appear to be the heartbeat of the college or university in terms of its intellectual vitality and growth potential, it is surprising that more investigation has not taken place. On the other hand, perhaps researchers have shied away from the area because of its potential sensitivity and the difficulty in assessing a proper balance between the traditional faculty activities of research, publication, teaching and student counseling.

CURRICULUM

Curriculum needs to be perceived as being reasonably modern in order to support a desirable image for any vital institution. Because a total curriculum is hard for many to evaluate per se, it is likely that this image pillar is evaluated on

the basis of surrogate measures. In technical and scientific areas, the currency of the curriculum is probably estimated by outsiders by the type of equipment in laboratories and "hands-on" facilities, such as computers.

With the number of college graduates increasing every year, the bookstore may become an important surrogate for curriculum evaluation. Since increasing numbers of college educated parents are becoming involved with campus tours as their children select an institution, they may discover that the level and overall versatility of an institution can quickly be estimated by reviewing the types of textbooks and other materials found in the bookstore. The library may also be utilized in a similar fashion.

Faculty image may be a third surrogate factor. In place of evaluating curriculum directly, some may review faculty credentials to assess publication, research and other types of productivity.

QUALITY OF TEACHING

Of the four research topic issues, post-secondary institutions seem to have placed most of their promotional emphasis on the issue of quality of teaching. Admission literature usually extols the virtue of such factors as small classes, faculty

contact, frequent advisement, etc. However, admissions people report that an increasing number of parents and students will ask about the number of classes taught by neophyte graduate assistants.

Interestingly enough, even outside evaluators fail to make any direct statements on this quality issue. A review of five well accepted college guides¹ reveals not one reports on the quality of teaching a student can expect in a school. General comments on "academic environment" is the closest issue reported.

How is quality of teaching determined by various institutional constituencies? Current students will base their image on personal contact with faculty and "perceived learning".²

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1. "Peterson's Annual Guide to Undergraduate Study '82"
"Comparative Guide to American Colleges"
"Lovejoy's College Guide"
"American Junior Colleges"
"Barron's Profiles of American Colleges"

A possible exception is the controversial "New York Times - Selective Guide to Colleges 1982-83" by Edward B. Fiske, which briefly mentions teaching quality.

2. The well known "Dr. Fox Experiments" reported by The Chronicle of Higher Education a few years ago showed a startling difference between perceived and actual learning. In this experiment, a professional actor gave a non-sensical lecture, "Mathematical Game Theory Applied to Physical Education", to three audiences of medical educators, students and other faculty members. Not one of the 55 listeners detected the hoax!

Alumni will probably have varying images, depending on the length of time since graduation. Employers will probably judge the image on the basis of how much students understand about specific subject areas and how well they adjust socially to the working world. The degree of success of graduates will also affect the employer's image.

PRICING

For years, commercial marketing personnel have known that a higher price generally equates with a higher quality image. In other words, consumers per se tend to assume that a higher priced item is also a higher quality item. This raises an interesting question for those researching higher education pricing. Will students and parents continue to be willing to pay in some significant part for the image of a prestige university background? Up to this point, the answer has been a resounding "yes". However, a good research question for the future is, "Will this continue?"

CURRENT STUDENTS

It is generally acknowledged everywhere in academia that student satisfaction is a critical building block of image because of peer influence. This fact is supported in the literature by years of research which indicate the important impact that peers have upon the choice and satisfaction with the college or university environment. Consequently, from a research perspective,

it would seem that a monitoring system needs to be established to determine what information current students are reporting to peers and parents about the institution. It might require long term modifications to handle some of the concerns.

However, in some instances, simple communications devices may be satisfactory because what is being communicated is based on misconceptions.

ALUMNI

The alumni group, an important constituency for image assessment, has been neglected in many different ways. It is not unusual to survey alumni in terms of their satisfaction with the curriculum and their career paths. However, it also appears important to assess their views of a school in terms of how they perceive changes that have taken place since graduation. Because of alumni importance with financial development and student recruiting, top academic administrators need to know more about the reality of alumni perceptions.

LOCAL COMMUNITY

Since we live in an age of rapid audio and visual communications, any conflict the post-secondary institution has with its surrounding community will be quickly communicated and impact its image. Consequently, a positive "town and gown" relationship

needs to be maintained. From a research perspective, a college or university needs to monitor this "town and gown" relationship. Most likely an image concern will occur in a rural location rather than in a urban location, where the students may tend to meld a little more easily with the surrounding urban community. However, institutions like Columbia University, with its conflicts with its neighbors, are clearly an exception to this observation. Other important variables to be considered are type of student, size of community, type of institution, socio-economic background of students and dormitory facilities available.

CAN AN IMAGE BE CHANGED?

As mentioned earlier, an institutional image held by an individual can be changed rather readily. One negative or positive experience makes the difference. Changing an institutional image held by a wide heterogeneous population is another matter. This takes considerable time, patience and consistent effort by those in leadership positions. Successful image changes have taken place in the commercial sphere with Japanese goods (from poor to high quality) and with Bloomingdale's department store (from medium to exclusive quality). No educational institutions have made such radical image changes, but a number of former teachers' colleges (emerging universities) and technical/agricultural institutions have been able to make appreciable improvement in quality perceptions.

These changes usually have been under the influence of strong leaders, e.g., Hanna at Michigan State University.

In order to make modifications, a baseline set of data must be available on which to make policy and operating decisions. Without these data, decisions will be made intuitively and without proper focus. This is a high risk approach because of the halo effect that is natural with top administrators when assessing their own institutions.

MARKETING ACTION PROGRAMS

In summary, the base for an image marketing program for post secondary institutions requires the development of a number of research areas. These areas present checkpoints for presidents to use in assessing the strengths of various image pillars.

1. Since faculty activity appears to be a critical pillar, research programs need to determine the extent to which faculty achievements and activities are being highlighted. Are these achievements being well communicated to the general public? Or are they being confined to those knowledgeable in a particular academic field?

2. Since current student attitudes can have a beneficial or deleterious effect on a university's image, it is important to continually monitor the attitude of this important group. In fact, it would seem advisable to set up a system to provide annual or biannual feedback in this critical area.
3. In a similar manner, alumni, as satisfied or dissatisfied clients, need to be questioned about their image perceptions. Although this does not need to be done as often as with current students, it should be accomplished with the same seriousness of purpose.
4. The image issue needs to be researched in terms of several local communities. This includes those who are physically living around the school, as well as recruiting employers, suppliers and others who come in contact with students and staff. In addition, tangential groups, like parent groups, need to be surveyed on an occasional basis. It is obvious they can easily become opinion leaders because of their close connections.

SUMMARY

Overall, what is needed is a system for image assessment to provide a basis for image development. Without this system and its information outputs, misconceptions can enter the policy-making process at critical junctures. Consequently, the life of the institution can be adversely affected. If the academic president is really the chief marketing officer of the organization, it would seem that he/she should call for this information on a regular basis. In response, the institutional researcher should provide the president with an image monitoring capacity that tells him/her what is happening to the Gestalt and its various pillars.

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